A Man for the Ages

A Story of the Builders of Democracy

By Irving Bacheller

ABE LINCOLN

Synopsis. — Samson and Sarah Traylor, with their two children, Josiah and Betsey, travel by wagon in the summer of 1831 from their home in Vergennes, Vt., to the West, the land of plenty. Their destination is the Country of the Sangamon, in Illinois. At Niagara Falls they meet a party of immigrants, among them a youth named John McNeil, who also decides to go to the Sangamon country. In the swamp flats of Ohio and Indiana they begin to be troubled with fever and ague.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

—3—

"I shall never forget that day spent in a lonely part of the woods," the good woman wrote to her brother. "It endeared the children to me more than any day I can remember. They brought water from the creek, a great quantity, and told me stories and cheered me in every way they could. My faith in God's protection was perfect and in spite of my misery the children were a great comfort. In the middle of the afternoon Samson returned with a doctor and some tools and a stick of seasoned timber. How good he looked when he came and knelt by my bed and kissed me! This is a hard journey, but a woman can bear anything with such a man. The doctor said I would be all right in three days, and I was.

"Late that afternoon it began to rain. Samson was singing as he worked on his wheel. A traveler came along on horseback and saw our plight. He was a young missionary going west. Samson began to joke with him.

"'You're a happy man for one in so much trouble,' said the stranger.

"Then I heard Samson say: 'Well, sir, I'm in a fix where happiness is absolutely necessary. It's like grease on the wagon wheels—we couldn't go on without it. When we need anything we make it if we can. My wife is sick and the wagon is broke and it's raining and night is near in a lonesome country, and it ain't a real good time for me to be down in the mouth —is it, now? We haven't broke any bones or had an earthquake or been scalped by Indians, so there's some room for happiness.'

"'Look here, stranger—I like you,' said the man. 'If there's anything I can do to help ye, I'll stop a while.'"

He spent the night with them and helped mend the felly and set the tire.

The fever and ague passed from one to another and all were sick before the journey ended, although Samson kept the reins in hand through his misery. There were many breaks to mend, but Samson's ingenuity was always equal to the task.

One day, near nightfall, they were overtaken by a tall, handsome Yankee lad riding a pony. His pony stopped beside the wagon and looked toward the travelers as if appealing for help. The boy was pointing toward the horizon and muttering. Sarah saw at once that his mind was wandering in the delirium of fever. She got out of the wagon and took his hand. The moment she did so he began crying like a child.

"This boy is sick," she said to Samson, who came and helped him off his horse. They camped for the night and put the boy to bed and gave him medicine and tender care. He was too sick to travel next day. The Traylors stayed with him and nursed the lad until he was able to go on. He was from Niagara county, New York, and his name was Harry Needles. His mother had died when he was ten and his father had married again. He had not been happy in his home after that and his father had given him a pony and a hundred dollars and sent him away to seek his own fortune. Homesick and lonely and ill, and just going west with a sublime faith that the West would somehow provide for him, he might even have perished on the way if he had not fallen in with friendly people. His story had touched the heart of Sarah and Samson. He was a big, green, gentle-hearted country boy who had set out filled with hope and the love of adventure. Sarah found pleasure in mothering the poor lad, and so it happened that he became one of their little party. He was helpful and good-natured and had sundry arts that pleased the children. The man and the woman liked the big, honest lad.

One day he said to Samson: "I hope you won't mind if I go along with you, sir."

"Glad to have you with us," said Samson. "We've talked it over. If you want to, you can come along with us and our home shall be yours and I'll do what's right by you."

They fared along through Indiana and over the wide savannas of Illinois, and on the ninety-seventh day of their journey they drove through rolling, grassy, flowering prairies and up a long, hard hill to the small log cabin settlement of New Salem, Illinois, on the shore of the Sangamon. They halted about noon in the middle of this little prairie village, opposite a small clapboard house. A sign hung over its door which bore the rudely lettered words: "Rutledge's Tavern."

A long, slim, stoop-shouldered young man sat in the shade of an oak tree that stood near a corner of the tavern, with a number of children playing around him. He sat leaning against the tree trunk reading a book. He had risen as they came near and stood looking at them, with the book under his arm. Samson says in his diary that he looked like "an untrimmed yearling colt about sixteen hands high. He got up slow and kept rising till his bush of black tousled hair was six feet four above the ground. Then he put on an old straw hat without any band on it. He reminded me of Philemon Baker's fish rod, he was that narrer. For humliness I'd match him against the world. His hide was kind o' yaller and leathery. I could see he was still in the gristle—a little over twenty—but his face was marked up by worry and weather like a man's. I never saw anybody so long between joints. Don't hardly see how he could tell when his feet got cold."

He wore a hickory shirt without a collar or coat or jacket. One suspender held up his coarse, linsey trousers, the legs of which fitted closely and came only to a blue yarn zone above his heavy cowhide shoes. Samson writes that he "fetched a sneeze and wiped his big nose with a red handkerchief" as he stood surveying them

"Come All the Way From Vermont?" Abe Asked.

in silence, while Dr. John Allen, who had sat on the door-step reading a paper—a kindly faced man of middle age with a short white beard under his chin—greeted them cheerfully.

"Where do you hail from?" the Doctor asked.

"Vermont," said Samson.

"All the way in that wagon?"

"Yes, sir."

"I guess you're made o' the right stuff," said the Doctor. "Where ye bound?"

"Don't know exactly. Going to take a claim somewhere."

"There's no better country than right here. This is the Canaan of America. We need people like you. Unhitch your team and have some dinner and we'll talk things over after you're rested. I'm the doctor here and I ride all over this part o' the country. I reckon I know it pretty well."

A woman in a neat calico dress came out of the door—a strong-built and rather well-flavored woman with blonde hair and dark eyes.

"Mrs. Rutledge, these are travelers from the East," said the Doctor. "Give 'em some dinner, and if they can't pay for it, I can. They've came all the way from Vermont."

"Good land! Come right in an' rest yerselves, Abe, you show the gentleman where to put his horses an' lend him a hand."

Abe extended his long arm toward Samson and said "Howdy" as they shook hands.

"When his big hand got hold of mine, I kind of felt his timber," Samson writes. "I says to myself, 'There's a man it would be hard to tip over in a rassle.'"

"What's yer name? How long ye been travelin'? My conscience! Ain't ye wore out?" the hospitable Mrs. Rutledge was asking as she went into the house with Sarah and the children. "You go and mix up with the little ones and let yer mother rest while I git dinner," she said to Joe and Betsey, and added as she took Sarah's shawl and bonnet: "You lop down an' rest yerself while I'm flyin' around the fire."

"Come all the way from Vermont?" Abe asked as he and Samson were unhitching.

"Yes, sir."

"By jing!" the slim giant exclaimed. "I reckon you feel like throwin' off yer harness an' takin' a roll in the grass."

CHAPTER III.

Wherein the Reader Is Introduced to Offut's Store and His Clerk Abe, and the Scholar Jack Kelso and His Cabin and His Daughter Bim, and Gets a First Look at Lincoln.

They had a dinner of prairie chickens and roast venison, flavored with wild grape jelly, and creamed potatoes and cookies and doughnuts and raisin pie. It was a well-cooked dinner, served on white linen, in a clean room, and while they were eating, the sympathetic landlady stood by the table, eager to learn of their travels and to make them feel at home. The good food and their kindly welcome and the beauty of the rolling, wooded prairies softened the regret which had been growing in their hearts, and which only the children had dared to express.

"Perhaps we haven't made a mistake, after all," Sarah whispered when the dinner was over. "I like these people and the prairies are beautiful."

"It is the land of plenty at last," said Samson, as they came out of doors. "It is even better than I thought."

"As Douglas Jerrold said of Australia: 'Tickle it with a hoe and it laughs with a harvest,'" said Dr. Allen, who still sat in the shaded dooryard, smoking his pipe. "I have an extra horse and saddle. Suppose you leave the family with Mrs. Rutledge and ride around with me a little this afternoon. I can show you how the land lies off to the west of us, and tomorrow we'll look at the other side."

"Thank you—I want to look around here a little," said Samson. "What's the name of this place?"

"New Salem. We call it a village. It has a mill, a carding machine, a tavern, a schoolhouse, five stores, fourteen houses, two or three men of genius, and a noisy dam. It's a crude but growing place and soon it will have all the embellishments of civilized life."

That evening many of the inhabitants of the little village came to the tavern to see the travelers and were introduced by Dr. Allen. Most of them had come from Kentucky, although there were two Yankee families who had moved on from Ohio.

"These are good folks," said the Doctor. "There are others who are not so good. I could show you some pretty rough customers at Clary's Grove, not far from here. We have to take things as they are and do our best to make 'em better."

"Any Indians?" Sarah asked.

"You see one now and then, but they're peaceable. Most of 'em have gone with the buffaloes—farther west. Now and then a circuit rider gets here and preaches to us. You'll hear the Reverend Stephen Nuckles if you settle in these parts. He can holler louder than any man in the state."

The tavern was the only house in New Salem with stairs in it—stairs so steep, as Samson writes, that "they were first cousins to the ladder." There were four small rooms above them. Two of these were separated by a partition of cloth hanging from the rafters. In each was a bed and bedstead and smaller beds on the floor. In case there were a number of adult guests the bedstead was screened with sheets hung upon strings. In one of these rooms the travelers had a night of refreshing sleep.

After riding two days with the Doctor, Samson bought the claim of one Isaac Gollaher to a half section of land a little more than a mile from the western end of the village. He chose a site for his house on the edge of an open prairie.

"Now we'll go over and see Abe," said Dr. Allen, after the deal was made. "He's the best man with an ax and a saw in this part of the country. He clerks for Mr. Offut. Abe Lincoln is one of the best fellows that ever lived—a rough diamond just out of the great mine of the West, that only needs to be cut and polished."

Denton Offut's store was a small log structure about twenty by twenty which stood near the brow of the hill east of Rutledge's tavern. When they entered it Abe lay at full length on the counter, his head resting on a bolt of blue denim as he studied a book in his hand. He wore the same shirt and one suspender and linsey trousers which he had worn in the dooryard of the tavern, but his feet were covered only by his blue yarn socks.

It was a general store full of exotic flavors, chiefly those of tea, coffee, tobacco, muscovado sugar and molasses. There was a counter on each side. Bolts of cloth, mostly calico, were piled on the far end of the right counter as one entered and the near end held a showcase containing a display of cutlery, pewter spoons, jewelry and fishing tackle. There were double windows on either side of the rough board door with its wooden latch. The left counter held a case filled with threads, buttons, combs, colored ribbons, and belts and jew's-harps. A balance stood in the middle of this counter. A chest of tea, a big brown jug, a box of candles, a keg and a large wooden pail occupied its farther end. The shelving on its side walls was filled by straw hats, plug tobacco, bolts of cloth, pills and patent medicines and paste-board boxes containing shirts, handkerchiefs and underwear. At the rear end of the store was a large fireplace. There were two chairs near the fireplace, both of which were occupied by a man who sat in one while his feet lay on the other. He wore a calico shirt with a fanciful design of morning-glories on it printed in appropriate colors, a collar of the same material and a red necktie.

Abe laid aside his book and rose to a sitting posture.

"Pardon me—you see the firm is busy," said Abe. "You know Eb Zane used to say that he was never so busy in his life as when he lay on his back with a broken leg. He said he had to work twenty-four hours a day doin' nothin' an' could never git an hour off. But a broken leg is not so bad as a lame intellect. That lays you out with the fever an' ague of ignorance. Jack Kelso recommended Kirkham's pills and poultices of poetry. I'm trying both and slowly getting the better of it. I've learned three conjugations, between customers, this afternoon."

The sleeper, whose name was William Berry, rose and stretched himself and was introduced to the newcomer. He was a short, genial man, of some thirty years, with blonde, curly hair and mustache. His fat cheeks had a color as definite as that of the blossoms on his shirt, now rather soiled. His prominent nose shared their glow of ruddy opulence. His gray eyes wore a look of apology.

"Mr. Traylor, this is Mr. William Berry," said Dr. Allen. "Mr. Traylor has just acquired an interest in all our institutions. He has bought the Gollaher tract and is going to build a house and some fences. Abe, couldn't you help get the timber out in a hurry so we can have a raising within a week? You know the arts of the ax better than any of us."

Abe looked at Samson.

"I reckon he and I would make a good team with the ax," he said. "He looks as if he could push a house down with one hand and build it up with the other. You can bet I'll be glad to help in any way I can."

"We'll all turn in and help. I should think Bill or Jack Kelso could look after the store for a few days," said the Doctor. "I promised to take Mr. Traylor over to Jack Kelso's tonight. Couldn't you come along?"

"Good! We'll have a story-tellin' and get Jack to unlimber his guns," said Abe.

Jack Kelso's cabin, one of two which stood close together at the western end of the village, was lighted by the cheery blaze of dry logs in its fireplace. There were guns on a rack over the fireplace under a buck's head, a powder horn hanging near them on its string looped over a nail. There were wolf and deer and bear pelts on the floor. The skins of fox's, raccoons and wildcats adorned the log walls. Jack Kelso was a blond, smooth-faced, good-looking, merry-hearted Scot, about forty years old, of a rather slight build, some five feet, eight inches tall. That is all that any one knew of him save that he spent most of his time hunting and fishing and seemed to have all the best things, which great men had said or written, on the tip of his tongue.

The new home.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Book as Granaries.

• • • Books are the great civilizers of the race, the storehouses of knowledge, the granaries of intellectual food. Therefore to designate in all candor which books of those that are made are, indeed, public pabulum, and which are straw; carefully and conscientiously to examine and explain, one man for the million, the publications which are conducive or detrimental, in whole or in part, to learning and progress, is one of the most important and noblest works in which man can be engaged, while to prostitute the powers requisite for such a position is one of the basest.—Hubert Howe Bancroft.

At a safe distance we do not hesitate to say that the prizefighters are no better than they should be.

Much Newsprint Imported.

Of the newsprint paper used by American newspapers only one-third is made in the United States from wood grown in this country. The rest is either imported or made from imported wood or pulp. The United States has enormous forest resources in her northwest and in Alaska, if pulp mills were properly located to handle the raw material.

The Most Chipper Man.

"Who was it said that life is like a poker game?"

"Dunno, but he was wrong, anyway. In poker it's the gayest man that has the blues."

One little tombstone may tell a big story.

The rhyme wave casualties are unsung.